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Homeland Security

United States  
Coast Guard



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**DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**

**U. S. COAST GUARD**

**STATEMENT OF**

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**ON**

**RESPONDING TO CATASTROPHIC EVENTS**

**BEFORE THE**

**U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**HOMELAND SECURITY'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

**AND THE**

**ARMED SERVICES' SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, UNCONVENTIONAL  
THREATS & CAPABILITIES**

**NOVEMBER 9, 2005**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to address you today as we discuss the role of the military and National Guard in disaster response.

As one of the nation's five military services, the Coast Guard has the unique capability, capacity and authority that allows it to play a critical role in disaster response. The Coast Guard is a first responder, one of very few federal first responders and the only national maritime first responder. Today I would like to discuss the Coast Guard's primary missions in disaster response, our strengths, limitations, and some issues that we must focus on as the nation moves forward in this area.

## **PRIMARY MISSIONS IN DISASTER RESPONSE**

The Coast Guard's primary missions in disaster response are:

- 1) Saving lives in distress and survivability of our own forces for post-disaster response;
- 2) Security and reconstitution of ports, waterways and infrastructure;
- 3) Oil, chemical and hazardous material response, and
- 4) Support to other agencies.

As always, saving lives in distress remains our first priority. During Hurricane KATRINA, the first rescues were made at Port Sulphur, Louisiana when a HH-65 Dolphin helicopter rescued two adults and an infant from a roof top at 2:51 p.m. on August 29 as winds still howled at 60 knots. The first Coast Guard cutter was on scene early that same afternoon. This is noteworthy since KATRINA made landfall shortly after 9:00 a.m. that morning.

I should also note that in an average year, the Coast Guard saves 5,500 lives. Within 48 hours the Coast Guard achieved half of that total in Louisiana and Mississippi alone. By September 14, Coast Guard forces had rescued 24,135 people by boat and helicopter and evacuated 9,409 more from 11 hospitals for a total of 33,544 rescues...statistically, seven years worth of search and rescue compressed into a two-week period.

In addition to search and rescue operations, the Coast Guard continued to flow forces into the impacted regions to restore ports and waterways, respond to pollution, and provide security and additional law enforcement throughout the region, including protection of offshore petrochemical platforms. KATRINA impacted 6,400 miles of shoreline. The Coast Guard responded to 1,380 Aids to Navigation discrepancies, handled 1,129 pollution cases, including seven major pollution incidents, and catalogued 1,000 salvage cases with more than 200 grounded vessels and numerous offshore structures that were adrift, damaged, or sunk.

Those of you who have had the opportunity to walk the ground in coastal Mississippi, or literally navigate the streets of New Orleans, know the magnitude of the challenge our men and women have faced and the reconstruction issues our nation will be dealing with for quite a while.

## **OUR STRENGTHS**

Coast Guard forces have several key strengths that allow a quick and effective response to natural disasters. That strength begins with our people whose dedication to response and adaptability to changing circumstances never ceases to fill me with pride and admiration.

Coast Guard ships and aircraft are built to respond to a variety of missions without the need for extensive reconfiguration or the addition of special equipment. A Coast Guard cutter that was conducting fisheries enforcement operations in the Gulf of Mexico could quickly be diverted to the New Orleans area to provide aircraft command and control, refueling, and forward staging facilities within only a few hours. Coast Guard aircraft that normally perform law enforcement surveillance in the Pacific Ocean were immediately available to fly disaster relief supplies to the Gulf Coast.

Additionally, Coast Guard forces are on station at key locations around the nation, many of them on short-notice recall, so they can respond quickly to emergent events. When a major catastrophe occurs, or is anticipated, we can reposition forces quickly to that area to optimize the response.

It is also important to note that the Coast Guard enjoys an agile command and control structure, which provides operational commanders the authority to move forces quickly to respond to emergencies. The Area and District Commanders can shift and reallocate forces from one region to another based on levels of risk and anticipated demand. The Coast Guard has also developed and regularly exercises continuity of operations plans for relocating command and control functions out of harms way.

In addition to fielding flexible, multi-mission forces and command and control systems, the Coast Guard also benefits from its unique mix of authorities, as well as extensive experience in both military and other interagency response organizations.

As a military service, the Coast Guard can be a supported or supporting commander and our forces are frequently integrated with Department of Defense (DoD) services in Joint Task Force organizations. We regularly provide forces in support of DoD exercises, Combatant Commanders contingency plans, and theater security cooperation activities. This close cooperation at the service level allows the Coast Guard to integrate seamlessly with DoD forces during disaster response operations.

In addition to its military role, the Coast Guard also works every day with other federal agencies, state and local governments, non-governmental agencies and international organizations under its U. S. Code, Title 14 law enforcement and regulatory responsibilities.

The Coast Guard is the nation's "maritime first responder" and has a leading role in executing the National Response Plan (NRP) for disaster situations. Our personnel are well trained and experienced in response operations, which makes them a sound choice to be designated as the Principal Federal Official and other key leadership positions in the NRP structure. This ability to operate concurrently in both military Joint Task Force and civilian NRP structures enhances unity of effort across response organizations and dramatically improves the effectiveness of disaster response and makes the Coast Guard a truly unique Federal agency.

## **OUR LIMITATIONS**

Despite the many strengths the Coast Guard brings to disaster response, the Service also has some limitations that must be considered.

The Coast Guard is a small service. With only 39,000 personnel on active duty, a major natural disaster severely strains our capabilities and requires a delicate balancing of risk in other geographic

and mission areas. At the peak of KATRINA operations, over 1/3 of all Coast Guard aviation assets were deployed to the Gulf Coast. We managed the impact on our nation-wide readiness posture by incurring additional risk throughout all 50 states. Canadian forces covered the Northwest Atlantic search and rescue mission in order to divert forces to the Gulf Coast. All aviation training was deferred until after the KATRINA response, and we decreased forces normally performing counter-drug, fisheries enforcement, and migrant interdiction operations in the Caribbean and Florida Straits.

Closely related to the overall size of the Service, we have a limited capacity to respond to long duration events. While the Coast Guard is well positioned for immediate and effective first response, our limited “bench strength” makes it impossible to sustain these operations for an extended period of time. Plans to sustain operations and hand off responsibilities once a crisis has been stabilized are a primary consideration for Coast Guard commanders responding to natural disasters.

The age and condition of the Coast Guard’s assets is another concern, and is one that the Administration, with the support of Congress, is working hard to improve. Started in 2002, the Deepwater Acquisition program is delivering new assets that offer increased multi-mission capability and capacity to the Coast Guard. The government has also invested extensively in new forces for the Coast Guard since 2001, such as 13 new Maritime Safety and Security Teams, 170 new small boats, 15 87-foot Coastal Patrol Boats, and four 179-foot coastal patrol craft to increase operational presence in the Nation’s Ports.

## **ISSUES TO FOCUS ON GOING FORWARD**

Lastly, I would like to echo many of the recommendations Secretary Chertoff has highlighted in recent weeks. There are several areas that will require continued energy and focus in the months and years ahead in order to enhance our national disaster response capacity and capability. Katrina was certainly not our last national challenge, but it is incumbent on leaders throughout every level of government to build on what went right and correct that which went wrong.

First, the Secretary outlined a significant re-organization within DHS earlier this summer, **called the Second Stage Review (2SR)**. Even before Katrina, I strongly believed that 2SR moved the Department in a very positive direction; I believe such a reorganization is made even more compelling in the shadow of Katrina. The Coast Guard will be an active contributor to the new Preparedness Directorate that the Secretary has recommended, as well as the new Policy and Planning development entities. The Department of Homeland Security does have significant operational capacity at its disposal, and we must collectively continue to improve our arrangement and management of that capacity to ensure it can respond to the full spectrum of homeland security mission requirements. At the same time, we will do everything possible to continue supporting FEMA in its critical coordination and response role. By virtue of our mission requirements, the Coast Guard necessarily has extensive experience and expertise in logistics and communications, as well as supporting business processes.

Second, I couldn’t agree more with the Secretary that we must continue to focus on improving communications between first and second level responders in the disaster area and ensuring adequate situational awareness. Federal, state and local first responders could benefit from a common framework designed to establish minimum requirements for communications interoperability. Concurrently, one of the most visible outputs of effective communications is a common operating picture. There is opportunity for DHS and DoD to work together to enhance our national capabilities in this area. For example, the Coast Guard has been working hard with DHS and DoD partners to enhance maritime domain awareness by the development and deployment of a maritime common operating picture. We must continue our deliberate work to break down barriers and develop improved

information sharing arrangements and hence improved situational awareness to support timely operational decisions.

Third, preparedness is essential. No amount of response capacity and capability will be effective without a foundation of preparedness. Relationships between all levels of government disaster responders must be created and maintained before an actual event. It is too late to start building key relationships when a hurricane is on your doorstep. Advance planning and exercises, involving all potential responders, are a must for effective disaster response. Command and control arrangements must be clarified, both in theory and in practice. Interoperability between the Principal Federal Official (PFO) and DoD Joint Task Force (JTF) commanders is critical. We must keep working to find the appropriate mechanisms that will guarantee unity of effort. Some cases may require unified commands, but in all cases it will require a common framework among Federal, state and local partners. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) goes far to provide that framework and the additional preparedness efforts set forth by the President and Secretary will help us test this framework against on-the-ground realities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Coast Guard is well-positioned to respond to natural disasters due to its unique blend of authorities, capabilities and capacity. Flexible, multi-mission forces and agile command and control systems provide the solid foundation from which we can respond to major catastrophes. When combined with broad authorities and experience operating with diverse partners, particularly the DoD, the Coast Guard provides a vital service to the nation. We in the Coast Guard look forward to working with our colleagues in DHS and DoD to enhance our preparedness for incidents of national significance.

Thank you for your consideration.